

Please don't feed the gators



Bill Gates/For the Times

A baby alligator emerges from a nest near Limestone Creek in Wheeler Wildlife Refuge in North Alabama.

North Alabama
population remains
steady at about 50

By **BEN HALLMAN**
Times Staff Writer
benh@huntsville.com

Yes, there are alligators living in the wild in North Alabama. No, they are not escapees from the Everglades or refugees from the New York City sewer system.

They've been here for at least two decades, possibly for thousands of years.

In the late 1970s, about 50 American alligators were released in the Alabama portion of the Tennessee River. Advocates hoped the endangered alligators would begin reproducing on the northern fringe of their habitat and help keep beavers — their dams damage wetlands — under control.

Not everyone was happy with nine-foot reptiles roaming their waterways. Public outcry led to a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service program aimed at trapping and relocating the alligators. By most accounts, the program was not successful.

Dwight Cooley, the manager of Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge, said "it is difficult to tell" if the alligators have reduced the beaver population, but the feared alligator invasion of heavily trafficked waterways never materialized.

The alligator population at the 35,000-acre preserve since the release has remained steady at about 50, he said, although that number is just a guess. His department has never attempted a count.

"They're just so difficult to find, there's so few of them, and they're hard to see anyway," he said.

Difficult to find, to be sure.

Two hours paddling around in swampy gravel pits in a part of the



Michael Mercier/Huntsville Times

Biologist Bill Gates of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service takes his daughter, Anna, on an alligator scouting trip in Wheeler Wildlife Refuge. No alligators were spotted this day, probably due, he said, to high water from recent heavy rains.

refuge near Limestone Creek on Thursday turned up only a water snake, a few turtles and about 500 spiders. Wheeler wildlife biologist (and temporary tour guide) Bill Gates said high waters might be to blame. He said many of the small islands in the middle of the swamp, where snoozing alligators recharge their cold-blooded bodies on sunny days, are underwater right now.

Gates said when the water levels drop, he can usually find "Stumpy" — a gator missing part of its tail — in one of the pits.

Fact or fiction?

Some think alligators may have roamed Tennessee Valley waterways — in small numbers — for thousands of years, Gates said.

He's not sure he believes the stories and suspects any pre-1970s sightings

were either a hoax or an escaped pet. But it looks like the gators are here to stay.

In 2001, he found a nest, which is a large mound of vegetation piled up by female alligators to house eggs and keep the reptiles warm while they hibernate through the winter.

Since then he has seen a few of the hatchlings, although most of them didn't survive the combination of hungry predators and cold winters.

Said Cooley: "If we have three to five bad winters in a row, only the large adults will survive."

The alligators are also frequently seen at Blackwell Pond south of Huntsville International Airport, Cooley said. There, slow-moving water and swampy conditions make for an alligator-friendly environment.

Please see **GATORS** on B2



Gators

Continued from page B1

At Redstone Arsenal, which shares refuge land along the Tennessee River, natural resources chief Danny Dunn said probably no more than three alligators prowl the territory he patrols. He said that they are six- to nine-foot adults from the late '70s release and that he has never seen a nest. He said they prefer the sparsely populated test areas and generally avoid humans.

Redstone may be as far east as the alligators travel. George Brakefield, who has managed Ditto Landing for 20 years, said, "I've never seen one, and I never hope to."

He said he has never heard of any nearby sightings either.

And if you do see an alligator?

"Treat them with a healthy dose of respect," Cooley said. "Maintain your distance and above all, don't feed them."

Gates echoed the last sentiment. "When you feed them, they start to associate humans with food."